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130906Z May 04

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 003733

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/13/2014

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SUBJECT: GOJ PROGRESSING ON PLAN OF ACTION FOR POLITICAL REFORM

REF: AMMAN 02729

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for Reasons 1.5 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) The Ministry of Political Development recently distributed a draft strategy and plan of action for political reform to selected diplomatic missions, members of Parliament (MPs), journalists and NGOs. The plan is relatively forthright in its assessment of the obstacles to the development of a democratic culture in Jordan, and contains objectives that include the adoption of new legislation on elections, political parties, and women's rights. The details of implementing these goals remain to be worked out through a national dialogue with different segments of Jordanian society. Prime Minister Faisal al-Fayez and other GOJ officials have already begun a series of meetings with different groups to discuss the draft, and plan a large opinion poll and a "national gathering" to gauge popular expectations. While reformist MPs and others acknowledge the GOJ's intent to give Jordanians more of a voice in the political process, they contend that lasting democratic reform will ultimately depend on whether the Palace is ready to devolve more authority to Parliament and local governing bodies. End Summary.

A PLAN IS BORN

2. (C) Following up on an earlier draft domestic reform plan (ref), the Ministry of Political Development & Parliamentary Affairs has over the past few weeks quietly distributed copies of a draft "Political Development Strategy and Plan of Action" to selected diplomatic missions, members of Parliament, journalists and civil society groups. This action plan lays out in a somewhat disjointed manner: 1) the King's vision and general objectives for democratic and political reforms; 2) problems and challenges to achieving reform in Jordan; 3) a strategy for developing a political development program; and 4) mechanisms for implementing political reforms, including the adoption of legislation.

3. (C) The section on the King's vision closely follows the Palace's oft-stated commitment to making Jordan a modern, open and tolerant society based on the rule of law, personal freedom (including full rights for women), and democracy. A new element in the document is a frank recognition of some of the obstacles the country faces in achieving this vision, including a "culture that rejects opposing opinions," civil society institutions that focus more on political opposition than promotion of rights, the pursuit of personal self-interest over democratic values among politicians, and the failure of political parties to develop national platforms that would attract rank and file Jordanians. Conspicuously absent is any mention of the disparity in power between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, or the current locus of decision-making authority far above the grass-roots level.

4. (SBU) The plan envisions a continuing national dialogue with representatives from all sectors of Jordanian society -- from MPs to academics, journalists to artists -- to develop and institute specific reforms, stimulate open debate, and encourage increased public participation in political life. The document also identifies needed legislation and timelines for adoption. The legislation includes a new political parties law that supports the formation of parties that can attract broad support, a new parliamentary elections law that expands "the choice of representatives in Parliament," and a municipal elections law that ends the appointment of local council members. Also mentioned are laws to strengthen the National Center for Human Rights and help end discrimination and violence against women.

MAKING THE SALES PITCH

5. (C) During a May 5 meeting at the Ministry of Political

Development (which is short-staffed with rotating employees on loan from other ministries and without a discrete budget), PolOffs learned that the Ministry has organized a series of meetings with different segments of society to discuss the draft strategy. A gathering with university students, for example, was held May 10, while meetings with military figures, women's groups, and religious leaders are on the future agenda. Ministry contacts also are hoping to hold a conference around May 20 (possibly with funding from the Japanese) to formally "introduce" the little-known Ministry and the draft action plan.

16. (C) Political Development Ministry senior advisor Rabha Dabbas informed PolCouns May 6 that the Ministry is finalizing a large opinion poll to ascertain popular expectations on democratic reform. She also said the Ministry hopes to cap the process with a "national gathering" to debate a more finely tuned version of the action plan. There are no definite dates yet for either the poll or the meeting.

17. (U) Prime Minister Faisal al-Fayez and other senior GOJ officials are also helping to galvanize support for envisioned political development. Fayez, for example, has met with youth and charitable organizations to underline their roles in reform. Deputy Prime Minister Mohammad Halaiga inaugurated a youth forum on political development where he told participants that the draft strategy envisions young people as "active players" in the political arena. Minister for Political Development Mohammad Daoudiyeh met April 26 with senior members of the press to promote the draft political action plan and to highlight the "pivotal role" of the print media.

SKEPTICAL MPS

18. (C) Lower House of Parliament Speaker Abdul Hadi Majali met with 25 MPs on May 3 to distribute and discuss the draft political development strategy. MP Mahmoud Al-Kharabsheh (East Banker - Balqa, 1st District), a frequent government critic, told PolOff that the meeting ended without any consensus or decision for future action. According to Kharabsheh, he and several other MPs were upset that the action plan, albeit still in draft form, had been developed thus far without input from Parliament. Kharabsheh said that some MPs had proposed forming a committee to draft a parallel political development plan, though he doubted that this would happen.

19. (C) Kharabsheh conceded that the action plan, if implemented, might "improve" the political situation in Jordan and prompt Jordanians to be less passive about participating in the political process. However, he was skeptical that it would result in any real change in the way important decisions were made given the Lower House's subservience to appointed cabinet ministers and the Palace. MP Raed Qaqish (Christian East Banker - Balqa, 1st District) told PolOff that while he thought the Palace and GOJ were sincere in encouraging Jordanians to "speak out" on domestic political issues, he wondered if this was "just for show" and questioned how seriously a government that is not accountable to voters would listen to citizen concerns.

INFIGHTING FOR CONTROL

110. (C) Embassy contacts and press speculation indicate that the political reform process has caused a rift between the new Ministry of Political Development and the long-established Ministry of Interior. Specifically, the Ministry of Interior has historically had responsibility for supervising the electoral process and for dealing with political parties, and is reportedly loathe to entrust development of new laws on elections and parties to the Ministry of Political Development. Former Prime Minister Taher al-Masri told PolOff that while Daoudiyeh and Interior Minister Samir Habashneh have a long personal relationship, this has not prevented competition between the two ministries over ownership of the reform process. Masri also noted hesitancy and concern over political development plans within the conservative General Intelligence Directorate (GID).

COMMENT

11. (C) The draft strategy represents a step forward on the way to a final, detailed plan for political and democratic reforms (albeit government-led). However, it is characteristic of Jordan's "top down" approach to reform. A more representative Parliament, broad-based political parties, and a vigorous civil society as called for by the strategy could give Jordanians a much greater voice in the

political process. Whether citizens will be able to actually shape government decisions, however, also depends on whether the King is willing to grant more authority to governing bodies directly accountable to the people.

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